DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 458 581 CS 217 673

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TITLE Picture Books: Who Are They For?
PUB DATE 2001-07-00
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Joint National Conference of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (Hobart, Tasmania, Australia, July 12-15 2001).
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.cdesign.com.au/aate/aate_papers/132_tan.htm .
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Awareness; *Authors; Childrens Literature; *Creative Writing; Imagination; *Picture Books; *Reader Response
IDENTIFIERS *Illustrators; Personal Involvement; Response to Literature

ABSTRACT

One of the questions an author/illustrator of picture books is often asked is: "Who do you write and illustrate for?" This paper asserts that the most successful creations are those produced without too much concern for how they will be received, or by whom. They do not set out to appeal to a predefined audience, they build one for themselves. The paper argues that although picture books are synonymous with children's literature, there is no reason why a 32-page illustrated story cannot have equal appeal for teenagers or adults as for children. Next, what older and younger readers might have in common is addressed. "The Lost Thing" is one work that is a good example of a picture book that manages to work on a number of levels by appealing to the readers' critical imaginations, regardless of whether they are children or adults. It is both simple and complex--depending upon how the reader chooses to understand it, not unlike life in general. In asking questions of the book, the reader is inevitably asking questions about his/her own experience in seeking individual closure. The lost creature is provocative rather than explanatory; readers cannot help but ask questions and consider what kind of metaphor it is. Returning to the question, "Who do you write and illustrate for?"--paper concludes that the ultimate answer is: anyone who reads and looks. At the end of the day, any work of art that finds its own audience, inviting them to make what they will of this or that idea. (NKA)

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One of the questions I am most frequently asked as a maker of picture books is this: 'Who do you write and illustrate for?' I have to say that it's not something I think about much when I'm working alone in a small studio, quite removed from any audience at all.

In fact, few things could be more distracting in trying to express an idea well enough to myself than having to think about other readers!

I think the most successful creations are those produced without too much concern for how they will be received, or by whom. They do not set out to appeal to a predefined audience, they build one for themselves. The artists' responsibility lies first and foremost with the work itself, trusting that it will invite the attention of others by the force of its conviction, veracity, beauty or disturbance. So it's really quite unusual to ask "who do you do it for?" Yet it is a question inevitably put to my work in picture books such as The Rabbits, The Lost Thing and The Red Tree, which deal with subjects such as colonisation, bureaucracy, whimsy, depression and loneliness, typically in a strange or unusual manner.

The reason of course is quite obvious. The idea of a picture book, as a literary art form, carries a number of tacit assumptions. Picture books are quite large, colourful, easy to read and very simple in their storyline and structure, not very long and (most significantly) produced exclusively for a certain audience, namely children, especially of the younger variety. Picture books are generally put on the shelves of book stores, libraries, lounge rooms and bedrooms for young children, where they apparently belong.

Picture books are synonymous with Children's Literature. But is this is a necessary condition of the art form itself? Or is it just a cultural convention, more to do with existing expectations, marketing prejudices and literary discourse?

The simplicity of a picture book in terms of narrative structure, visual appeal and often fable-like brevity might seem to suggest that it is indeed ideally suited to a juvenile readership. It's about showing and telling, a window for learning to 'read' in a broad sense, exploring relationships between words, pictures and the world we experience every day. But is this an activity that ends with childhood, when at some point we are sufficiently qualified to graduate from one medium to another? Simplicity certainly does not exclude sophistication or complexity; any serious reader, writer or artist would know that the truth is otherwise. "Art," as Einstein reminds us, "is the expression of the most profound thoughts in the simplest way."

And it's clear that older readers, including you and me, remain interested in the imaginative play of drawings and paintings, telling stories, of learning how to look at things in new ways. There is no reason why a 32-page illustrated story can't have equal appeal for teenagers or adults as they do for children. After all, other visual media such as

film, television, painting or sculpture do not suffer from narrow preconceptions of audience. Why should picture books?

I have been asked on a few occasions to speak at literary conferences about how my own picture books such as The Rabbits, Memorial and The Lost Thing are "boundary breaking". Boundary breaking perhaps in terms of style, structure and use of media, although I don't think any of these features are especially original or unique. The real implication again has to do with audience, either pushing or dissolving a boundary between readership levels. Rather than talk about the differences between older and younger readers, however, I would prefer to consider what they might actually have in common.

In particular, we are all interested in playing. We like to look at things from unusual angles, attempt to seek some child-like revelation in the ordinary, and bring our imagination to the task of questioning everyday experience. Why are things the way they are? How might they be different? As an artist, these 'childish' activities are the things that preoccupy me when I draw pictures and make up stories, and they don't necessitate a consideration for any particular audience. What matters are ideas, feelings and the pictures and words that build them. How can they be playful and subvert our usual expectations? What are the ways that something can be represented to most effectively invite us to think and ask questions about the world we live in?

My most recently published work "The Lost Thing" is a good example of a picture book that manages to work on a number of levels by appealing to the reader's critical imagination, regardless of whether they are children or adults. It is both simple and

complex - depending upon how the reader chooses to understand it, not unlike life in general. Everybody would be familiar with the story; a boy discovers a lost pet one and tries to find out who owns it or where it belongs. The text alone offers little else in the way of insight; the animal in question is described only as a "lost thing", and little is said of where this story is set, or who might be telling it. Yet there is enough there that we recognise what is going on. After a number of failed attempts, the boy finally discovers what appears to be an appropriate home for the lost thing. The story ends, although no particular conclusion is put forward.

It is within this simple narrative shell that our recognition is played with and our comprehension challenged. For a start the 'lost pet' is unlike anything we might normally expect. It is a huge tentacled monster, not quite animal or machine, with no particular function or origin. Whimsical, purposeless and estranged from everything around it, it is out of place in a much deeper sense than just being 'lost'. The environment described by the illustrations also resists any simple reading: a treeless industrial metropolis full of excessive plumbing, mysterious and dehumanising architecture, green skies and cheerless citizens. Furthermore, nobody pays any attention to the lost creature, despite its disruptive presence as a conspicuous absurdity. What's going on? A passage between familiarity and strangeness is opened, and the reader cannot help but ask questions in the absence of any explanation.

The first person narrative is deliberately deadpan; inconclusive to the point of casual dismissal. "That's the story," the boy tells us at the end. "Not especially profound, I know, but I never said that it was. And don't ask me what the moral is." Even the blurb

on the back of the book says nothing about it; there is no insistence that anything be 'correctly interpreted'.

Any real meaning is left to the reader to find for themselves, rather than overtly stated or implied, with an encouragement towards a close visual reading against quite minimalist text. Why are the colours limited to industrial greys and browns? Why are there pieces of physics, algebra and calculus text-books framing every scene, and text written by hand on scraps of lined paper? Why do all the houses look the same, why is everything draped in shadow, what are those images of clouds about? What is that strange place glimpsed through a doorway at the end of an anonymous alley? What is the lost thing?

It's not as if the book is a puzzle punctuated by clues that needs to be solved. Unlike a riddle, there is no clear answer to these questions, which remain open. I myself continue to find new meanings in the words and pictures as I did when producing the story over the course of a year. It could be read as a critique of economic rationalism, for instance, or the transition from childhood to adulthood; about the value of whimsy, our obsession with categories and bureaucracy, about alienation, claustrophobia, altruism, disability, entropy and the possibility of joy in places where this has been extinguished.

In asking questions of the book, the reader is inevitably asking questions about their own experience in seeking individual closure. What aspects of it are familiar, and why? What does it remind you of, or make you think about? This is a picture book that works through such resonance rather than recognition, or any didactic imperative; ideas and feelings are evoked rather than explained.

For the moment, one possible reading of "The Lost Thing" that I'd like to suggest has to do with reading itself. It's actually a very self-reflexive book in that it is about 'visual literacy', and the importance of having a critical imagination, and of playing. There are two oppositional ways of seeing, understanding and experiencing the world that are presented by the story.

The first type of visual literacy is one restricted to the recognition of familiar things. This is a literacy based on fixed definitions, control, order and efficiency, the kind of 'reading' that takes place when we observe street signs, look at maps or watch the nightly news. This action is something we do all the time, a passive decoding that allows us to manage our day to day lives, particularly as responsible adults, to recognise relationships between things and events as efficiently as possible. However, this kind of 'closed reading' can go too far to the extent that it makes alternatives invisible, and anything unfamiliar is dismissed as foreign, useless and unwelcome. Thus we have the "Federal Department of Odds and Ends", a concrete building without windows into which anything strange, miscellaneous or otherwise challenging - outside the familiar prescriptions of recognition - is conveniently "swept under the carpet" once the correct forms have been filled in. Experience is a matter of bureaucracy, and literacy is there to measure prescribed value.

The other kind of visual literacy, as represented by the disruptive presence of the lost thing within this closed system, is one that works through playful questioning, enigma and absurdity. The lost thing resists classification and passive recognition, to the extent that it moves through the city unnoticed, unable to be 'read' by those with "more important things to do". The counterpoint to the morgue-like Department of Odds and

Ends is a bizarre landscape of happy freaks, fleetingly glimpsed through a back-alley doorway. This can be read as the world of imagination and open-ended meaning: playful, chaotic, purposeless, and with much greater promise of aesthetic and intellectual freedom. Nothing actually belongs here - or more to the point, the question of belonging is kept open, like a back-alley exit.

The lost creature is provocative rather than explanatory; you can't help but ask questions and consider what kind of metaphor it is. For me, as a creator of picture books, it tends to represent that window of imagination: strange play, disruption and child-like wonderment that is always available, but only if you're willing to look up and notice it.

Returning to that question, "Who do you write and illustrate for?" Perhaps the best answer I can give is this: anyone who reads and looks. That is, anyone who is curious, who enjoys strangeness, mystery and oddity, who likes asking questions and using their imagination, and is prepared to devote time and attention accordingly. "Books are not a way of letting someone else think in our place," writes Umberto Eco, "on the contrary, they are machines that provoke further thought." The failure of the narrator in The Lost Thing to realise any meaning in his own story, seeing it as pointless, leaves such responsibility in the reader's hands. For me, a successful picture book is one in which everything is presented to the reader as a speculative proposition, wrapped in invisible quotation marks, as if to say "what do you make of this?"

At the end of the day, any work of art finds its own audience, inviting them to make what they will of this or that idea. This is probably the main reason that The Lost Thing has been successful with all kinds of readers, including those who are normally quite

reluctant to read picture books. "There are many lessons to be learned from this book, but there is no requirement to learn them," writes one reviewer. "The reader can get as much or as little as they want." Another critic comments that "despite the off-handedness, some readers will inevitably seek meaning and indeed the style of the book invites such inquiry."

What makes art and literature so interesting is that it presents us with unusual things that encourage us to ask questions about what we already know. It's about returning us, especially we older readers, to a state of unfamiliarity, offering an opportunity to rediscover some new insight through things we don't quite recognise. This is perhaps what reading and visual literacy are all about - and what picture books are good for - continuing the playful inquiry that began in childhood.